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GROWTH OF THE POSTAL SYSTEM.

AN ADDRESS

BY

HON. JOSEPH H. MILLARD,

AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE

NEBRASKA ASSOCIATION OF
POSTMASTERS.

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GROWTH OF THE POSTAL SYSTEM

BY

HON. JOSEPH H. MILLARD

Nearly the entire growth of the postal service within the boundaries of Nebraska has been made since my advent into the territory in 1856—a mere boy. The records of the department at Washington show that the first postoffice in Nebraska was established at Omaha in 1854. Two years later there were perhaps a dozen postoffices at the settlements along or near the river, the names of these places now being familiar to all old settlers. I recall that among the very first offices were Brownville, Nebraska City, Bellevue, Omaha, DeSoto, Ft. Calhoun, Fontenelle, Tekamah, Decatur and Dakota City. The net growth since those days is shown by the latest official table, which gives the number of offices in the state at 959. A year ago the total number was 972, the installation of rural free delivery service causing the abandonment of a number of cross-roads postoffices.

THE PONY EXPRESS.

Before the government established mail facilities in the west on a scale that would insure rapid transit, the settlers patronized the pony express for the transmission of mail matter, or made other contract arrangements for getting letters to and from the states. Their experiences in this regard were not unlike those of the Puritan fathers in Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut and other New England colonies. In either case the

pioneers were forced to provide facilities for transmission of mail matter far in advance of installation of government service.

THE FIRST RURAL CARRIER.

The books tell us that long before the Revolutionary war Great Britain gave to one Thomas Neale a royal grant to transport mail matter for the American colonists from plantation to plantation at such compensation as his patrons would pay. He was at once the first star-route contractor and the first rural carrier in America of whom history tells us.

But, like the pony express, the Royal Mail was destined to be displaced by a mail service established by the colonies. Virginia as a colony established a postoffice in every town, and passed a law providing for the carrying of the mail from plantation to plantation at a stated price or fee per letter. Soon every colony did likewise, until the evolution of the system embraced the thirteen colonies.

FEDERAL CONTROL.

From this stage it was but a step to federal control, and as population extended and avenues of communication broadened, the need for uniformity became apparent. Therefore, in 1775 the Continental Congress passed a law creating the office of postmaster general, and thus began the federal system of post-offices and postroads as we see them today, every decade adding some new and valuable adjunct or development. The general features of the present system were not, however, adopted by congress until 1792. At that time the whole number of post-offices was 75, yet much mail was delivered from a common distributing point to the settlers over a vast territory. In those days some of the rural routes were hundreds of miles long.

On March 1, 1905, the number of postoffices was 71,131, and the number of rural routes was 31,796. The annual receipts of the postoffice department during the first year of its

existence were less than thirty thousand dollars; the last fiscal year the total receipts were over a hundred and forty millions.

EARLY-DAY POSTAGE RATES.

In 1816 congress fixed the postage rates as follows: Single letter, under 40 miles, 8 cents; under 90 miles, 10 cents; under 150 miles, 12½ cents; under 300 miles, 17 cents; under 500 miles, 20 cents, and over 500 miles, 25 cents. At that time the sender did not have to prepay postage on his letter, but if he did so the postmaster stamped it "prepaid." In 1845 congress passed a law making the rate on a single letter 5 cents for distances under 300 miles, and 10 cents for any greater distance. I think it was some time in the 50s that congress passed a law reducing the rate of letter postage to 3 cents for all distances under 3,000 miles, and 10 cents for a single letter for any distance above 3,000 miles, and the postage upon all inland mail had to be prepaid, but in 1863 the letter rate was made uniform at 3 cents. The 2-cent uniform rate was ordained in 1883. A 2-cent stamp will now prepay carriage of an ordinary letter from New York or any point in the United States to the farthest island in the Philippines.

There were no envelopes we are told until some time in the 50s. Letters were folded so that the corners of the sheet met and were thus fastened with wafers or wax and seal. This practice brought into use the seal ring, long since discarded.

INTRODUCTION OF THE POSTAGE STAMP.

Before Nebraska was admitted into the Union congress provided for the registering of valuable letters and also established the money order system, which, however, has since been greatly improved. But the introduction of the postage stamp by federal authority marked a great epoch in the development of the postal system. Necessity had suggested it. Up to that time postmasters in many places printed their own issues of postage stamps or

stickers, bearing the name of the town where the letter was mailed and evidencing the prepayment of postage. Postmasters sold these stamps at a private profit or broker's commission, and the stamps so greatly facilitated the sending of letters that their use became general and the volume of mail matter increased materially. In response to popular clamor, congress provided for a uniform postage stamp and made unlawful the use of any other.

THE RURAL SERVICE.

Just 50 years later (1897) congress provided for the establishing of rural routes, which was another great step forward, and has also operated to increase the volume of mail matter to and from the country precincts. Last year the rural service cost the government \$23,000,000. Today there are 872 rural routes in Nebraska and the department is authorizing solid service in counties having the required population.

Twenty-five years ago there were 15 railway postal routes in Nebraska with but 2,000 miles of railroad. Now there are 65 rail routes in operation over a trackage of 7,300 miles of road. Can any state in the Union show a larger rate of increase in mail facilities?

NEBRASKA'S FIRST POSTMASTER.

Just a word about the Omaha postoffice, which was established May 5, 1854, in charge of the late A. D. Jones, with W. W. Wyman as deputy. Five years later it became the first presidential postoffice in Nebraska, when President James Buchanan appointed W. W. Wyman as postmaster. Mr. Wyman did all the work of the office. Now 226 persons are employed. Its receipts for the year ending March 1, last, were \$566,284. Over 150 railway postal clerks and many rural carriers are paid through the Omaha office, the postmaster disbursing over a million a year.

His responsibility is greater than that of any other postmaster in Nebraska, yet we all realize that Uncle Sam calls for the best grade of men for postmasters in all the cities and towns of Nebraska. Happily, the record shows that few mistakes have ever been made in the selection of men for these important places. Rare indeed are the removals for cause. I have often thought it remarkable that the government almost invariably secures good men willing to assume the responsibility of handling the mails although the remuneration is too often inadequate.

A CHOICE BETWEEN GOOD MEN.

For a time during my term of office it was my official duty to select men for postmasters in the Second, Third and Sixth Congressional districts. Very rarely was I asked to endorse an unworthy man. In nearly every case excellent men aspired to the office, and it was therefore a case of choosing between the claims of two or more good men. Sometimes there were six or eight aspirants, each sending in a petition, and in many cases all petitions bore the names of patrons of the postoffice who had signed the petitions of the other fellows as well, no doubt wishing to make sure of backing the winner. At best, it is not a pleasant task to select a man for office when by so doing there is a certainty of making a number of political enemies.

A CASE IN POINT.

In one case I have in mind the incumbent postmaster was a newspaper man who wished to be reappointed. There was much local pressure to get him to give way to another active partisan having valid claims upon the party. He dissented and there was considerable feeling manifested, both parties being backed by the best citizens in the community. It was stated to me that if the postmaster could be reappointed he would agree to resign the very day after his confirmation if requested so to do. They presented a written stipulation later on, signed by

the incumbent and the contestant, and their respective backers, agreeing that the postmaster should be reappointed on condition that he resign at the end of the year and give way to the contestant, who was strongly endorsed by the state committee. Very naturally I assented, yet the man who retired from the office has never forgiven me for my action in the matter.

However, I can congratulate myself upon the fact that the election of republican congressmen in the districts named relieved me of the unpleasant task of choosing postmasters out of a number of good men who aspired to the same place, and I can congratulate the state upon the fact that in nearly every case the men appointed as postmasters have proved themselves most worthy of the confidence reposed in them.

GROWTH OF NEBRASKA.

My observation has been that in most cases men chosen for the office of postmaster have enjoyed high standing at home; men who have had a hand in the upbuilding and development of the communities in which they live and who take pride in the growth of our state. We have noted the development of the postal service since the present boundaries of Nebraska were fixed, but it has been no more wonderful than the growth of our state in wealth and population. The remarkable strides made during the last eight years are unparalleled in the history of the west. In that time I venture to say the material wealth of the state has doubled. No country has improved faster than has Nebraska since the last census was taken. The value of farming lands has doubled, stock-growers have received good prices for their increasing number of cattle and hogs, while the yield of grain has never been equalled in the history of the west.

In looking back over the years of my residence in Nebraska, I can recall no time when prospects were more pleasing than they are today.

To be a citizen of Nebraska is indeed a special privilege.